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AFFECTIVITY AND SELF-DISPLACEMENT IN STEIN'S EARLY PHENOMENOLOGY ON THE ROLE OF SELF-EXPERIENCE IN EMPATHY¹

abstract

In this paper, I shall focus on the role of bodily self-displacement in Stein's account of empathy, pointing out its relevance in the general dimension of affectivity. In my view, Stein grounds empathy on a dynamic model of embodied self-experience, which shares significant similarities with Varela & Depraz's neurophenomenology. However, I shall argue that Stein's view of empathy cannot be reduced to a naturalised phenomenological sense and that bodily self-displacement is pre-condition of a more complex disposition towards others as in line with Ratcliffe's theory of radical empathy.

keywords

phenomenology, empathy, affectivity, self-displacement, Edith Stein

Introduction From a phenomenological point of view, empathy allows a basic grasp of another's experience without producing any identification or simulation. Both in *Ideas II*, in the *V Cartesian Meditation*, and in the voluminous manuscripts on intersubjectivity (Husserliana 13-15), Husserl argues that empathy is what allows the other to be given to me as perceptually present (Zahavi 2014: 127). For Husserl, empathy primarily involves apperceiving the other as an embodied self, whose experience is passively grasped drawing on the reservoir of meaning that is provided by the experience of one's own body. In this sense, sensing one's own body plays a crucial role in that it represents the primary condition for being able to respond to another's state. As Zahavi has pointed out, «my body is given to me as an interiority, as a volitional structure, and as a dimension of sensing, but it is also given as a visually and tactually appearing exteriority. And the latter experience, the fact that my own self-experience is characterized by this remarkable interplay between *ipseity* and *alterity*, is, according to Husserl, precisely one of the elements that must be in place if empathy is to be possible» (Zahavi 2014: 135). With this regard, Zahavi stresses that bodily self-experience counts as precondition of empathy and not as a model for other-experience. When I encounter someone whose experience exceeds or contrasts with my own, my experience does not constitute any model, but rather it represents the dimension against which the other can be sensed by contrast. Thus, a more complex explication of our receptivity to the other's experience is necessary for empathy to be fulfilled.

Following Husserl, Stein developed her dissertation on the problem of empathy by taking into account the constitution of the lived body. For Stein, empathy involves both apperceiving the other as an embodied self as well as understanding the other as a person. Although these two experiences are distinct from each other, they are not separate. While the experience of one's own body is based on dynamic aspects of sensitivity and affectivity that intersect one's own subjective experience with that of another, understanding others as persons involves the appraisal of *die geistige Person*, i.e. the constitution of the person as a subject belonging to intersubjective spiritual nexuses. In the following, I will restrict my analysis to Stein's account of the lived body, which includes an original appraisal of affectivity and self-experience in the context of empathy.

With this regard, Stein's account of empathy has recently been the object of a number of

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articles and in-depth analyses². Among these, Vendrell Ferran's study is remarkable in that it brings to the fore the importance of affective intentionality in Stein's early works. As Vendrell Ferran has shown, Stein proposes an original stratification of emotional life that is based on the reach, duration, and intensity of feelings³. In relation to this, my analysis will target an aspect of Stein's account of affectivity that is central for empathy, i.e. the role of bodily self-displacement. More precisely, I shall concentrate on the fact that one's own self-experience is not the experience of a monolithic and static subject, but rather a dynamic phenomenon, which is characterised by interrelated episodes of sensations, emotions, and bodily changes. In this respect, Stein shows that empathy presupposes the kaleidoscopic shifting of bodily self-perception, thereby anticipating several important findings of genetic phenomenology in an original way.

To begin with, Stein's analysis of the constitution of the lived body centres on the distinction between proprioception and heteroception. According to Stein, the body constituted in outer perception is a physical object that is out "there". Yet, unlike other objects located in space, my physical body «is always given to me in successive appearances only variable within narrow limits. As long as I have my eyes open at all, it is continually there with a steadfast obtrusiveness [*Aufdringlichkeit*], always having the same tangible nearness as no other object has. It is always "here" while other objects are always "there"» (Stein 2010a: 57; Stein 1964: 39). The reference to the "obtrusiveness" of one's own body suggests that the lived body participates in the horizon of my perceptual field, providing orientation in space. If I pay attention, I can discern a variety of bodily features that limit my visual field: for instance, the curve of my nose, the movements of my body, my posture etc. In this sense, perceiving outer objects does not coincide with perceiving oneself as having a certain position in space. Such difference corresponds to the basic distinction between proprioception, e.g. sensing one's own body as spatially oriented, and heteroception, e.g. seeing oneself in the mirror. For this reason, sensations correspond to sensory fields that are localised in the body. In contrast with judging, willing, and perceiving, sensations are «always spatially localized "somewhere" at a distance from the "I" (perhaps very near to it but never in it), I can never find the "I" in it by reflection. And this "somewhere" is not an empty point in space, but something filling up» (Stein 2010a: 57; En. tr.: Stein 1964: 39).

By referring to the spatial location of sensations and to their distance from the "I", Stein does not defend any alleged Cartesian dualism. On Stein's account, sensations are not sensory data devoid of meaning, but rather they stand for the originary sensitive motility of the body as they "fill up" the organs and generate different possibilities for action and movement. In this sense, far from introducing any hiatus between understanding and sensibility, Stein's inquiry focuses on the existence of sensory fields that are permeated with possibilities for action. From this point of view, the analysis of sensations makes explicit a form of motor intentionality that is based on the shifting of the surrounding world due to body movements.

1. Bodily Self-Displacement

² For an overview of current debates on empathy that include the appraisal of Stein's phenomenology see Meneses & Larkin (2012), Aaltola (2013), Haney (2013), Dullstein (2013), Zahavi (2014: 123-145), Vendrell Ferran (2015), Jardine (2015), Lebech (2015) and Svenaeus (2015). While Meneses & Larkin, Haney, Zahavi, Aaltola and Dullstein have extensively developed the problem of perception in Stein's account of empathy, showing the significance of Stein's phenomenology for contemporary psychology, Vendrell Ferran, Jardine and Svenaeus have pointed out the relevance of affectivity in Stein's view of empathy. For a detailed reconstruction of the importance of Stein's phenomenology in contemporary debates on empathy and social ontology see also Szanto & Moran (2015).

³ Cf. Vendrell Ferran (2015), who convincingly argues that Stein's approach shares Brentano's paradigm on affectivity, but she also made important changes to it.

It follows that one has different sources of movements depending on the type of action that is at stake: «This zero point is not to be geometrically localized at one point in my physical body; nor is it the same for all data. It is localized in the head for visual data and in mid-body for tactile data» (Stein 2010 a: 58; Stein 1964: 40). If I sit and stay still on my chair, my head and my eyes will determine my sense of orientation, but in dancing and moving the body has the torso as primary source. As a result, there are as many zero points of orientation as possibilities for action and movement.

Moreover, Stein emphasises that the relation that I can establish between my own zero point and the different parts of my body cannot be compared to the distance of external objects to me. In this sense, body space (*Leibraum*) and outer space reflect a distinction between the first-person and the third-person point of view. Body space presents itself as the *locus* of motor intentionality and it is available to self-experience, while having a representation of one's own body as an item located in outer space corresponds to the third-person perspective. What Stein emphasises is the intermodal translation of different ways of sensing that is missing in the third-person perspective. I do not simply see things as items located at measurable distance from my own position, for I also *sense* them: «The robes in Van Dyck's paintings are not only as shiny as silk but also as smooth and as soft as silk» (Stein 2010a: 61; 1964: 41-42). With regard to this, Stein mentions that there are different forms of associations, which are not exclusively based on representations, for example when I see a lump of sugar and I remember that is sweet. Stein's argument is that I can *see* the sweetness of the sugar lump without entertaining a picture of it. This because my own perception of the sugar lump is embedded with emotional and synesthetic features that draw on my past experiences and influence my overall disposition to objects and events. In my view, Stein's extensive observations on the constitution of the lived body indicate that kinetic and synesthetic features are conjoined in perception in order to provide a dynamic and embodied model of self-experience.

In relation to this, it is noteworthy that Stein was familiar with the studies of Moritz Geiger, who distinguished between psychic state (*Zustand*) and psychic activity (*Tätigkeit*). While states are usually related to feelings provoked by certain objects (e.g. a melody or a painting), activities are bodily movements that can be influenced by feelings (Geiger 1911: 50). Accordingly, Geiger differentiated between empathy of moods and empathy of activities or movements. While the former is induced by an external object and rests on psychological associations, empathy of activities depends on the phenomenon of *Gefühlverschmelzung*, i.e. the fusion of feelings caused by seeing someone doing something. As pointed out by Pinotti (2000: 465), Geiger conceived of empathy as a complex phenomenon brought about by the distinction between two poles: the subject of the experience and the object, which latter induces certain states or feelings in the subject. Stein's reference to Van Dyck's painting seems a direct reference to Geiger's theory of empathy. Unlike Geiger, Stein insists that a system of intentional nexuses takes place between the body and the environment so that what is given in outer perception is not represented pictorially, but rather reactivated from the nexus of retained experiences and integrated in a general sense of motor intentionality. Importantly, Stein's discussion of the lived body brings to light the relevance of bodily self-displacement in the psychophysical constitution of the ego. As Sheets-Johnstone (2015) has recently argued, the proprioceptive sense that I am when sitting or standing does not immediately translate in a "pre-reflective sense of myself as embodied". Quite to the contrary, the kinaesthetic experience of movement is of a particular qualitative dynamic that cannot be reduced to ownership. According to Sheets-Johnstone, ownership is «an adult concept and a third-person term, a strictly objective, even culturally derived and culturally-anchored observation [...]. Apart from the fact that what I have I may own – a car, a computer, a plot

of land – to speak of ownership of one's own movements is phenomenologically vacuous» (Sheets-Johnstone 2015: 35). In other words, Sheets-Johnstone remarks that kinaesthetic movements have the function of making us aware of the potential self-displacement of the ego rather than giving us a sense of ownership. Stein's analysis of the lived body points in the same direction: if the psychophysical constitution of the body has to provide the basis for empathy, it must also comprise a fundamental character of self-displacement and self-distantiation. For Stein, what is disclosed by empathy is not a monolithic subject without quality, but rather the fundamental quality of sensitivity as disposition to feel and to be affected in the relation to the world. In this sense, bodily feelings cannot be separated from sensations:

Every mental act, every joy, every pain, every activity of thought, together with every bodily action, every movement I make, is sluggish and colorless when "I" feel sluggish. [...] Not only do I see my hand's movement and feel its sluggishness at the same time, but I also see the sluggish movement and the hand's sluggishness. We always experience general feelings as coming from the living body with an accelerating or hindering influence on the course of experience (Stein 2010 a: 65; Stein 1964: 45).

Somatic feelings, such as sluggishness, influence my overall sense of inhabiting a certain environment. However, only somatic feelings have the quality of filling up the body. Feelings that are not strictly somatic in nature, such as joy or melancholy do not. Still, they influence and interact with each other, and cohere together in generating my sense of being in time. Thus, feelings shape the world-view in which I am inserted. From this point of view, the stratification of emotional life addressed by Vendrell Ferran in relation to Stein's phenomenology can be further differentiated in light of Varela & Depraz's analysis of time and affectivity (Varela & Depraz 2005).

To be sure, Stein distinguishes between different forms of feelings on the basis of their duration (Vendrell Ferran 2015). However, such distinction is a pre-condition of empathy in that it shows that affects are always embedded with a specific form of response to the other, whether the environment, an object or another subject, thereby generating a specific sense of inhabiting the world. On Stein's (and Varela's) account, there are as many affective levels as temporal phases: states represent the awareness of the tonal shift that is constitutive of the living present (they fill up the body); higher-order feelings stand for the dispositional trend of coherent sequences of embodied activities (they do not fill up the body, but give the general tone of my being in time); moods (*Stimmungen*) exist at the scale of narrative description over time. Although states, feelings, and moods all develop over time, they are qualitatively different with regard to their affective tonality as well as to their axiological properties. In this sense, in Stein's view, the givenness of one's own body is expressive of our bodily acquaintance with the world, a capacity that is grounded in the psychophysical constitution of the self as well as in its general sense of existence.

According to this model, «whatever affects me I cannot experience raw, as proto-impressions or impacts (*Uraffektion*). The very first appearance is already pervaded by affective tendencies: some form of a pre-egoic source is already affected, a world is already sketched» (Varela & Depraz 2005: 64). We respond to others' states and bodily feelings without necessarily being aware of them as objects of our intentional acts. At the same time, this form of embodied response displays what Varela & Depraz call "valence", i.e. «a dynamic polarity, as manifesting in the form of a tension that takes several forms: like-dislike, attraction-rejection, pleasure-displeasure» (Varela & Depraz 2005: 70). Valence is a form of unconscious organic fluctuation, embedded with axiological properties, and related to time consciousness. In fact, affect-

2. When Varela Meets Stein

feelings are supposed to fill the “I” not like states, but rather as ramifications of the affective flow of intentionality by means of which the ego is self-organising and lives in a temporally extended present. From this point of view, basic concerns such as coping in everyday life and our habitual stance have a common structure, that is to say a feeling-tone and a complex embodied condition. Instead, affect-emotions exhibit the structure of a rainbow, in which the bodily subject is generative of valence, as well as its modes of relationship with others (Depraz 2008). According to such scheme: «The more I open up toward others, the more I am led to welcome them, to be receptive to their positive and negative emotions, to their joy or to their suffering; the more I turn toward myself, the more I contain my own feelings, be they negative (e.g., despise) or positive (e.g., admiration)» (Depraz 2008: 255). In this sense, temporality functions as the very source of the emotional rainbow.

One could say that, for Stein, empathy presupposes what Varela would have called a broader dispositional orientation towards the feelings and states of another. However, the kind of bodily self-displacement described by Stein offers a necessary but not sufficient condition for empathy. In fact, for Stein empathy involves a more complex stance towards others that includes the receptivity to spiritual formations such as values and culture. While valence is involved in the tendencies that drive us towards others, it is not a rationale of our capacity to grasp the meaning of another’s state. It follows that empathy is not restricted to the experience of one’s own body, for empathy includes both the capacity to respond to others’ bodily states and feelings as well as to intersubjectively constituted relationships with the world and others. While Varela & Depraz hold a naturalised model that ultimately connects time dynamics with the heart-system model (Depraz 2008), Stein’s account calls into question the capacity of understanding others as persons. In this sense, it seems that empathy cannot be reduced to the affective experience of the “now” in the naturalised phenomenological sense held by Varela and Depraz.

It is noteworthy that in her 1922 study on *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* Stein does not take into account the problem of empathy as she rather focuses on the relationship between causality and motivation. This is particularly important if one considers that life feelings and states of living belong, in this second work, to sensate (or physical) causality. Weariness, states of excitement, exhaustion, they all determine different states of tension and manifest an enduring real property: life-power. This enduring property of the real ego, corresponding to the substrate of the sensible occurrences of mental phenomena, replaces feelings and states (Stein 2000: 24-25; Stein 2010b: 22-23). Life-power can be described as a field of generative powers that is continually operative. By contrast, motivation represents the “pointing-at” that is inherent in each intentional act. Significantly, Stein identifies motivation with apprehension, which is active, as a lower form, even in perception. Basically, Stein argues that motivation is an inclination to fulfil an intention, hence it is teleological or goal directed. As O’Conaill (2012) has put it, «in a state of being motivated, a course of action is prefigured or laid out in advance in the agent’s apprehension of the motivating phenomenon. This is to say, in being motivated the agent is aware of the object x, and is thereby aware of and drawn towards a specific course of action, y. It is in this sense that an action that fits the motivated course of action is released by a meaning». Stein seems to hold this view, when she argues that motivation is a structure that is valid for the entire range of intentional experiences. However, motivation is not primarily and exclusively an inclination to act, but rather a synthesis of apprehension.

For Stein, motivation functions as “authentic spontaneity”: it is what compels us to fulfil an intentional act without necessarily being a voluntary performance of the ego. It is at stake when we understand a meaning, or make judgments, but it is also responsible for the apprehension of a determinate sense-content at the level of perception. In higher levels of act-

operation, motivation is manifested as conscious, whereas in the case of perception motivation lies in the background. Furthermore, «the availability of motives does not *compel* the ego to accomplish the acts in question» (Stein 2000: 55; Stein 2010b: 48). The relevance of motivation has remarkable consequences upon the analysis of the psychophysical individual. While feelings and bodily states do not enter the connections of motivations, because they rely on life-power, hence are governed by sentient causality, higher-order feelings, such as emotions, i.e. feelings that have a value attitude (Stein 2000: 75; Stein 2010b: 65), are constituted as motives that exercise a pull. Unlike states and feelings, emotions are schematised as motives, i.e. they are not simply co-apprehended, but rather motivate me to fulfil their affective tendencies, i.e. to live them through.

One can notice that motivation does not strictly coincide with explicit reasoning, but it is rather the synthesis that takes place during an act of reasoning in that it provides continuous syntheses of temporal succession, thereby establishing continuity as well as self-coincidence. In this sense, empathic experiences always emerge towards a motive and enter into transcendental syntheses and connections of motivations. However, what enters the connections of apprehension of empathy is not the felt content, but rather the meaning content (Stein 2000: 107; Stein 2010b: 92). I can empathise with the tiredness or the sluggishness of another in virtue of nexuses of bodily acquaintance, but, when I empathize with her emotions, a synthesis of apprehension is required like in language comprehension. If I do not pay attention to a word, the physical sound alone does not express any meaning to me. Likewise, in empathy the expression of the other does not compel me to respond unless it becomes the object of my attention. For this reason, Stein stresses that we do not empathise on the basis of our own subjectivity and character: «I can experience values empathically and discover correlative levels of my person, even though my original experience has not yet presented an opportunity for their exposure» (Stein 200a: 133, Stein 1964: 104). By means of empathy, we anticipate experiences that we cannot find in our original experience. In this sense, empathy, besides drawing on bodily self-displacement, involves more complex disposition towards others that would deserve further attention.

As shown by Stein's analysis of the constitution of lived body, being able to decentre one's own experience provides a necessary precondition of empathy. In this sense, bodily self-displacement enables the self to respond to the feelings of another by drawing on one's own capacity to inhabit a horizon that is subjected to the shifting of the point of view. However, at the same time, empathy also requires the capacity of understanding another's mode of existence beyond perceptual features. In order to better illuminate this aspect, I shall refer to what Ratcliffe calls "radical empathy" (Ratcliffe 2012). According to Ratcliffe, the phenomenological method facilitates a distinctive kind of empathy, which he labels "radical" to emphasise that it incorporates a specific form of engagement with others. This means that, through the phenomenological stance, the world of the other enters my own world and become mine. What is distinctive of the phenomenological stance is the capacity to suspend one's own beliefs and norms in order to recognise relevant features of experience that are presupposed in our everyday life. In this sense, for Ratcliffe, radical empathy requires (i) suspending common assumptions regarding the modal space inhabited by both parties and (ii) bringing to light the modifications of that space as possibilities or changes in the sense of reality or belonging.

With regard to this, Ratcliffe takes into account Stein's phenomenology by pointing out that «her account allows for the possibility of empathic experiences that are generated by cognitive processes, rather than in perception-like way, and these might have some sophisticated contents» (Ratcliffe 2012: 476). Ratcliffe's aim is to show that there can be an empathic

3. Stein and Radical Empathy

experience of others' existential spaces even when these fall outside the sphere of one's own experience, at least in certain respects. For example, in the case of psychic illness or profound grief, one can refer to variations in one's own experience or make use of imagination. Such experiences can be understood through a phenomenological stance and interpreted in terms of changes in a sense of reality and belonging (Ratcliffe 2012: 486). With this regard, a striking feature of Ratcliffe's theory of radical empathy is that «the world that comes into focus through a phenomenological stance has neither a first- nor a second-person content, but appears as "ours"» (Ratcliffe 2012: 486). On Ratcliffe's account, radical empathy is a stance of openness to the other that also implies a willingness to be affected by the other. The constitution of a common world that both the empathiser and the empathised inhabit is possible only in the course of the empathic experience itself. In this sense, empathy cannot be restricted to any specific point of view, for it requires not just the translation of one's own mode of existence in that of another, but rather and more importantly the willingness to understand and interact with another's mode of existence in and through the institution of a common world.

As Ratcliffe himself notices, radical empathy is not without limits. «Once we have accepted that radical empathy is possible, there is a lot more to be said about *how* it is achieved» (Ratcliffe 2012: 487). Here, I wish to point out that both aspects of Ratcliffe's account, i.e. the appraisal of non-perceptual aspects of the empathic experience as well as the relevance of a common world made available by willingness and interaction, are central features of empathy from a Steinian perspective. For Stein, affects play a relevant role in establishing the possibility of apperceiving another as inhabiting an emotional and existential space. Yet empathy primarily consists in the possibility of making sense of the experience of another in a way that is potentially transformative and enriching for both empathiser and empathised. As Stein writes, «by empathy with differently composed personal structures we become clear on what we are not, what we are more or less than others. Thus, together with self knowledge, we also have an important aid to self evaluation. Since the experience of value is basic to our own value, at the same time as new values are acquired by empathy, our own unfamiliar values become visible» (Stein 2010a: 134; Stein 1964: 105).

This because empathy allows one to take a step beyond one's own self-experience and to participate in interactions that are regulated by laws of motivation rather than by physical causality. In engaging with the other, one needs to adopt a stance of openness, which involves spending time with the other, being affected by her, and reflecting upon the impact of the other on our own sense of reality. For this reason, Ratcliffe's insights on empathy are particularly helpful because they shed light on the relevance of the empathic *attitude*. As Ratcliffe points out, empathy is not an unconscious way of simulating another's experience due to a contingent perceptual encounter. Quite to the contrary, empathy is stance of openness that establishes a potential new common world in virtue of the willingness of both subjects to participate in the empathic relationship. In relation to this, Ratcliffe refers to the transformative moment achieved within the patient-psychiatrist relation when the patient sees that her lived situation is being understood by the psychiatrist. The very fact that the doctor has an "inkling" of the patient's experience often results in a form of trust that enables and sustains the patient's process of healing. In this sense, empathy is the dimension that empowers self-knowledge without yet providing any coincidence of perceptual states between two subjects.

Conclusions By way of conclusion, let me recall the main points of my brief analysis. I have argued that, from a Steinian perspective, empathy is grounded in a dynamic model of embodied self-experience that is partly compatible with Varela & Depraz's neurophenomenology. From this point of view, Stein's analysis of the constitution of the lived body offers important insights on bodily self-displacement. However, unlike Varela's approach, Stein holds a non-naturalised

account of lived experience. With regard to this, empathy implies attentiveness and a formed attitude to respond to the feeling of another in an appropriate way. In this sense, bodily self-displacement allows one to decentre one's own experience, but a more radical orientation towards another's sense of existence – as sustained by Ratcliffe's account – is necessary for empathy to be fulfilled.

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